

Lesson 10: New Punctuation... ☺

We know that language is always changing. Pronunciation changes perhaps faster than other kinds of grammatical changes since it doesn't match up with the written language very well anyway; so you can say "bought" pretty much however you want, as long as you have something close to a "b" sound at the beginning and something close to a "t" sound at the end. We're slower to accept morphological and syntactic changes since you can see them in writing. If you say *I seen him*, that looks a lot different from *I saw him*, so we notice these variations more. And until recently, I'd say that our punctuation system was pretty set. You can read a very brief history of punctuation in this post, and I've also written about how standards of punctuation can vary, as mentioned here, but in general, our system of punctuation has been fairly fixed since the 18th century. So the new punctuation is really exciting! We have old punctuation being used in new ways, and new symbols being incorporated into our punctuation system (emojis).

Slash/ - Anne Curzan has written about slash, and it was even a runner-up in the Word of the Year vote by the American Dialect Society. The / used to be a not so frequent punctuation mark, but has come in to the spoken language much more frequently of late, and into the written language as **slash**, written out as a word like that. You can read more about this new conjunction here. What's especially interesting is that this newish (it's not clear how new - a former student just wrote me yesterday that she heard a Friends episode from 2002 when Ross says, "So much for my dinosaur slash Amelia Earhart theme park," so it's been around at least since then with this newish meaning. Thanks, Mary!) use in which speaking the punctuation (and writing it as slash rather than /) seems to capture something kind of different from how we understand the punctuation mark in writing. And getting a new conjunction is big news, because we just don't get those very often, like not in 1000 years.

These things: "" - These so-called quotation marks have long been used to mark things other than quotations. I mentioned here the Blog of Unnecessary Quotation Marks which has examples like this one:

. Why are these funny? Let's first consider the three primary uses for these little marks, "": (1) to mark direct quotations, (2) as **scare quotes**, which serve to alert the reader that either the word or phrase is being used in an unusual way or that the writer doesn't accept the phrase or is using it ironically, or (3) to emphasize, which is what most of the Blog of Unnecessary Quotation Marks' examples are intending to express. OK, so why are they funny? Because we can read them as scare quotes, even though we know that's not their intended use: Excuse our "Emptiness"

It seems that all of these writers can't be wrong in their use of this bit of punctuation. It's simply less established than the other two uses of the "" marks. It's true that the emphatic ""s show up a lot more in hand-written signs where we don't have the benefit of bold or increasing font size in a systematic way, so these marks "" are given yet

another duty. But the emphatic use is not something that was likely ever taught. It's come about out of a need; writers' ingenuity comes into play. In speaking, of course, we'd have other ways of making the point, with intonation, pitch, and facial expressions. In print, we have to make do with other methods. Would underlining be preferable? Why or why not?

Ellipses... - My students brought the changing meaning of ellipses to my attention. We all know the basic use of these within a quotation where you've left some of the stuff out: Harry Potter said, "In school if you make a mistake, you can just try again...but out there, you don't know what that's like." That's not new or interesting. The new use is mostly in texting. Texting has brought about all kinds of appropriation of existing punctuation, and in some cases, these are gaining new meanings. So one student mentioned a text he received from his dad which read something like "Give me a call when you get a chance..." The student was worried; he interpreted the ellipses as a marker of anger or disappointment. Other students agreed that they would too. When he talked with his dad, though (abandoning texting in favor of a voice call since he thought Dad was mad), Dad was fine and hadn't intended that meaning at all. I think I got the dad's intended meaning from the ellipses, though: this isn't urgent, call when you can, no big deal. The ellipses as used in text messages have completely different meanings for these two writers.

The Period. - Similarly, there's an article here on the changing meaning of the period in texting and other informal online communication: When there is a shift in topic, a line break can do the job. Most texters would agree that

I'm home now

what's for dinner?

can sound a lot friendlier than

I'm home now. What's for dinner?

The question I like to pose to my students is how they know all this. Where do their ideas about the meanings of the punctuation and the contexts in which they are appropriate come from? How are these standards and new uses emerging? My students – and yours too – definitely have a sense of when certain marks are appropriate and when they are not. And because some of these uses are relatively new, we're not all on the same page, so to speak, and so misunderstandings can emerge. I just think this is a cool way to begin to explore the notion of standardization and language change and to realize that now, as always, we the people are the creators of the standards. And it's important to drive home that the students are really savvy about these evolving rules of etiquette and conventions. And, in fact, students are knowledgeable not only about conventions of texting, but also about when to use various genres of writing styles (despite the myth that texting language is ruining "language skills". See here for a LanguageLog post on that). Focusing on their knowledge is a good way to introduce these topics - You're good at this! Now let's explore what you know! Linguist John McWhorter, in this New York Times piece, writes the following about texting and email: "...the looseness and creativity of these new ways of writing are a sign of a new

sophistication in our society. This becomes clear when we understand that in the proper sense, e-mail and texting are not writing at all....Keyboard technology, allowing us to produce and receive written communication with unprecedented speed, allows something hitherto unknown to humanity: written conversation. In this sense, [emails and texts] are not “writing” in the sense we are accustomed to. They are fingered speech.”

I think there are lots of conversations and activities that could emerge from the info in this post, but here are a few:

Activity: Have students consider their uses of capitalization in texting, in email, and in other online communication. Do they ever not capitalize the first letter of their name? If so, when? What factors enter in to that choice? What about ALL CAPS? Would they ever use that in a message, and if so, what is the intended effect?

Activity: Have your students consider their use of acronyms and abbreviations such as lol, brb, or ttyl. Do they use them? If so, in what situations? Have them come up with other acronyms and abbreviations that are completely integrated into the language, such as radar, laser, and scuba or DVR or tv, or ID. If they aren’t aware of what the full forms of these words and phrases are, have them look those up in a dictionary. (Many of my students report that their parents, in their 40s and 50s, for the most part, are much more consistent users of abbreviations such as *u* for *you* and *ur* for *you’re* or *your*, and also of the acronyms.)

Activity: What is the future of emoticons? Emoticons offer us an opportunity to express emotion in writing in a way that is otherwise really cumbersome. We can convey that something is ironic or silly or sad, without using words. We can soften the way that something is read. Now, the use of emoticons is restricted to texts, chat, and some email communication, but have your students discuss whether these features might ever enter into more formal written discourse. What would be the benefits? Drawbacks?

Oh, and no discussion of punctuation is complete without mention of **the interrobang**.